The Fourth Church Pulpit

INCARNATION

December 13, 1992

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Isaiah 35:1-10, John 1:1-18

"And the word became flesh and lived among us..."
-John 1:14 (NRSV)

We praise you, God of life and light, for the mystery of word made flesh.

We praise you for love and laughter.

We thank you for the incarnation, your love, born in our midst...in Jesus, our light in the darkness. Amen.

What in the world did God have in mind?... A fairly serious question, that, and the answer I encountered this week was provided by a ten-year-old whose name is Charlie. It's in Robert Cole's wonderful bestseller, *The Spiritual Lives of Children*. Coles is professor of Psychiatry at Harvard and has written several important books about children and their growing and becoming. In this recent volume Coles asked children about their faith, what they believed and what it meant to them. He discovered some delightful surprises and some profound wisdom.

Charlie said:

> "People forget Jesus had a father as well as a mother and he was a carpenter. I told my friend Gerry that Jesus' dad was a carpenter, and he said, 'No, God is Jesus' father.' We argued. Our minister said we're both right: Jesus had two fathers, one in heaven and one here! That's not bad! I know a lot of kids, they don't have any.
>
> "I think of Jesus having a dad who was a carpenter because I wonder why God chose that kind of family for him. He must have had a reason, right? That's how I see it. He must have thought to himself: 'Why, I want my son to be down there with just plain people, nothing fancy.'"

Charlie went on then to editorialize delightfully:

> "If Jesus had grown up in a plush house and been a spoiled brat, that's the big danger in this town, my folks keep telling me! — he'd have been different. Wouldn't he? Don't you think? [*The Spiritual Life of Children*, Robert Cole, p. 210]

Charlie, age ten, from Sudbury, Massachusetts, exhibits impressive theological precision with his proposition that God thought "I want my son to be down there with just plain people, nothing fancy!"

That is the incredible claim of Christmas. That is what Advent is about. It is the heart of our faith, our life together, our witness, our mission, our church. "I want my son to be down there with just plain people."

The theological term is "Incarnation" which means, literally, enfleshment.

And the loveliest and earliest expression of it sounds like this:

> "In the beginning was the Word,
> And the Word was with God
> And the Word was God.
> And the Word became flesh and lived among us."

And:

> "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

There are libraries written on these few sentences. They are arguably among the most important sentences ever written by anyone. People have been pondering them, studying them, arguing about them since they were written around the end of the first century of our era. Charlie and his friend in Sudbury, Massachusetts, are by no means the first people to argue about who Jesus' father really was. For several hundred years the Christian Church fiercely debated who Jesus was, and what it meant to call him Son of God, and also God Incarnate. That argument is still going on, almost two thousand years later.

The prologue to John's Gospel, which we heard this morning, was written in a different way and from a different perspective, probably a few decades later than Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is one of our precious treasures. It was a custom of the ancient Christian Church for the priest to read the passage over newly baptized infants. I was intrigued to learn that both St. Augustine and St. John Chrysostom, two of the intellectual giants of the early church, agreed that it was quite beyond human power to write the way John wrote in the prologue.

The ancient church had symbols for each of the four Gospels. They are, in fact, carved into this pulpit. The symbol assigned to John the Evangelist by the ancient church is the eagle. The symbol for Matthew is the lion, Mark — a man, Luke — an ox. John, the fourth Gospel, is the eagle who soars to celestial heights, the eagle who alone in the animal kingdom, it is said, looks directly into the sun and is not blinded.

I think of that every time I read the opening words of the fourth Gospel . . . like looking directly at the sun, like looking directly into the heart of God. "In the beginning was the Word."

"In the beginning was the idea," Reynolds Price says is a way to get at this. First the idea — the notion — the impulse; it is with God - it is God; and when the idea is expressed the result, the word spoken is Jesus.

Reynolds Price is one of our finest modern writers. He contributed to a collection of essays by contemporary writers on the New Testament. Price wrote about the fourth Gospel and with a novelist's fine eye and ear for nuance proposes that there is a "burning outrage in this prologue. It is either a work of madness or blinding light."

> "If we give it the serious witness it wants, we must finally ask the question it thrusts so flagrantly — Does it bring a life — transforming truth, or is it one gifted lunatic's tale of another lunatic, wilder than he?"
> [*Incarnation, Contemporary Writers on the New Testament,* Alfred Corn, p. 39]

What was so outrageous about John's notion of the word, the idea becoming flesh, was that nobody, nobody at all in his world thought like that. The word — if there is such a thing, God — if God exists and almost everybody then and now assumes the existence of some deity — God doesn't become flesh. It's the exact opposite. God being God is not flesh at all. The intellectual world of the Roman Empire rested on the foundation of an unassailable assumption that there was spirit and there was matter. God is spirit . . . the tangible world of creation: human beings — their senses, their passions, their natural processes — are matter. God is perfect, good; matter is obviously not so good, not perfect, obviously finite; the flesh deteriorates, dies, decays. The purpose of human life must be to transcend, to rise above all that is earthly and finite and imperfect. It is the function of religion to point to — to show the way to — that other realm, the realm of the spirit.

So when a first century Jew writes:

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God and the Word became flesh and lived among us" he is saying something outrageous. He is either mad, or he has, literally, seen a light that no darkness can overcome.

Presbyterian theologian, Howard Rice, in a fine book which some of us read together this fall, tackles the issue. (Rice, by the way will be here in March to preach and to lead a Lenten Workshop.) He believes that we are constantly tempted to reject the world that God has created as somehow inferior to a "spiritual world" we have created in our imagination. Rice says that to believe in the incarnation is, indeed, to have a light in the darkness. If, indeed, the idea which was from the beginning with God, became flesh and lived among us, we have new light shed on the subject of God and ourselves and the world and the future.

Rice expresses it beautifully, I think.

> "The world around us is completely changed by the incarnation, and we are enabled to see everything in a new way when we view it as those who believe God saw fit to live here in the person of Jesus." [p. 164]

To entertain the notion of the incarnation, to accept as a viable intellectual proposition that God somehow dwelt in the life of a particular man, is to see everything in a new light. Incarnation is a way of seeing the world, a way of thinking about the world which is very different than the way secularists think. Nowhere in recent history at least, has that been more clear than in the intellectual struggle which helped to precipitate the collapse of state dictatorship in Eastern Europe, not only of the demise of the economies but the intellectual structures, controlled and dominated by the intentional determined atheism of state-sponsored Marxism.

In a recent meeting I was privileged to attend between American Presbyterians and leaders of churches from the former Soviet block, we were told again that when there is no freedom to debate the viability and truth of ideology. When there is no place to subject ideas to free inquiry and criticism, when to do so openly can cost you a career, or the opportunity for your children to go to university, or even land you in prison, the only places to register dissent, to say "no" intellectually, are the arts and the church.

Librarian of Congress, James Billington, in a recent speech said:

> "The one thing that was common to all the changes (in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe) was the role of religion: Catholic in Poland, Lutheran in East Germany, and Orthodox in Russia."

In Rumania the popular revolution that brought down the dictator Ceausescu began when a congregation of Rumanian Reformed Christians — Presbyterians — in Timisoara — circled the manse to prevent the police from taking away their pastor, Laszlo Tokes. And as the revolution unfolded, protesters all over Rumania took up the cry, "Timisoara."

Billington says:

> "The reality goes unrecognized. The role of religion is the most stunning single intellectual omission from media analysis and, indeed, from most university-based analysis of world events." [Martin E. Marty, "Context," 12/1/92]

Incarnation — this world as the place where light shines in the darkness, the world, the place where God lived in Jesus; this world where God's kingdom comes; this world where all people of all nations, all races, bear God's image and are therefore creatures of infinite worth, creatures of dignity, and integrity who, because of incarnation are created for freedom and justice and fullness of life. It's a new way of looking at the world.

And it's a new way of understanding what it means to be faithful as an individual — and as a church. If the spiritual realm is different from the material realm, if religion's purpose is to assist people to transcend the world, then the faithful life is intentionally withdrawn from the world and the church becomes a kind of safe haven, a retreat, a quiet spiritual place where the world is not allowed to intrude.

But if the word became flesh and lived among us — the faithful life is modeled on that dynamic. The momentum of faithfulness is not away from the world but into the world in the name of God.

Howard Rice argues for a "new spirituality" which emphasizes both a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, which has been the focus of conservative Christianity, and a passionate concern for this world and for other people, the speciality of liberal Christians. A "new spirituality" will include birth. John Calvin set the tone, Rice reminds us, by beginning his mammoth theology, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion,* with a "Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France," on the role of a Christian ruler.

It is a characteristic of reformed spirituality, he says, to be deeply invested in the world. Presbyterian churches are hotbeds of do-gooders, in the best sense of the word; people who are everywhere in society, giving generously of their time, energy and resources to make the world a better place: symphony orchestras, school boards, colleges, museums, homeless shelters, and every conceivable kind of committee and organization promoting public betterment and improvement. Calvin developed the idea that public service is a noble calling from God. [*op. cit.,* p. 153-155]

Incarnation is a way of viewing the church — a way of being church: a way which intentionally balances two orientations - God and the world - worship and mission: piety and social action. Part of the agony of the mainline church in our culture is the residue from a struggle, which is decades old now, between those who want the church to do and to be one or the other — a worshipful sanctuary from the troubles of the world or a social service agency whose purpose is to cure the ills of the world. To view the church incarnationally is to reject the argument and to insist that our task is to be and do both. As Harry Emerson Fosdick used to say, "to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable," to be an incarnational church is to go public with the faith, to celebrate God's gracious forgiveness and the gifts of reconciliation and peace which are part of our salvation, and to tutor the children and house the homeless and provide physical fitness classes for the elderly and day care for infants, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. To believe that the word became flesh is to know that our place is here on this most worldly corner, to be here what we advocate, what we stand for, and will fight for — the value of life, for instance, the precious value of every child's life. By what we do here, to be in this place a light which will not be overcome by darkness because the word, the idea, became flesh and lived among us.

Became flesh. Flesh must be good if the word became it. I read somewhere that 80 percent of women and probably as many men dislike their own bodies. But bodies must be okay, if God's Word, God's Idea became one. If not beautiful by the standards of high fashion advertising, absolutely beautiful in God's eyes and therefore in ours, because the word became flesh.

And beyond that: this life of yours, this bubble of existence which is your life, your dearest relationships, your hopes and aspirations, your fears, your failures, your sins, your passion and joy — nothing about it is alien to God. Nothing about you exists outside the realm of God's healing, reconciling, saving love.

D. H. Lawrence understood the radical idea of incarnation even when the theologians and churchmen of his day were backing away from it and retreating to a more ethereal, spiritual religion. He wrote in a poem:

> "Religion knows better than philosophy.
> Religion knows that Jesus never was Jesus till he was born from a womb and ate soup and bread and grew up, and became, in the wonder of creation, Jesus, with a body and with needs, and a lovely spirit."
> [*Demiurge,* D. H. Lawrence, *Selected Poems,* p. 133]

All flesh is blessed because the word became flesh. Nothing about you is alien from the God who in Jesus knows what hunger and thirst and desire feel like; knows what it means to be joyful with friends and lonely alone, abandoned; knows the exhilaration and festivity of wonderful celebrations; knows humility and shame; knows grief, knows tears, knows laughter, knows even death. Nothing about you is alien from God. The word became flesh.

It is the one sentence we human beings crave, Reynolds Price says:

> "The maker of all things loves and wants me. Fragile creatures made by God's hand, hurled into space, then caught at last by a man in some ways like ourselves, through the arc of God." [*op. cit.,* p. 72]

It's like looking directly at the sun — and not being blinded. It's like looking into the heart of God and for a moment, at least, a brief filament of time, understanding it's like a light shining in the darkness.

Charlie said God must have thought, "Why, I want my son to be down there with just plain people, nothing fancy."

Another way of saying it is this:

> "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us,. . . ."